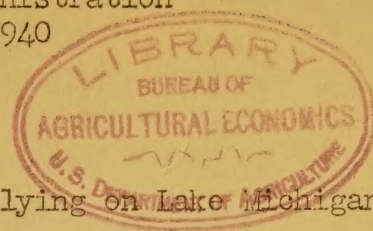


Summary of a Field Survey of Migrant Farm Labor
in Berrien County, Michigan
by the Labor Division, Farm Security Administration
U. S. Department of Agriculture, 1940

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Description of Area

Berrien is the southwesternmost county of Michigan, lying on Lake Michigan. It is part of an intensive truck and fruit belt, specializing in raspberries, blackberries, dewberries, strawberries, cherries, apples and peaches. The last census showed that Berrien County led the United States in production of black raspberries, was third in blackberries and dewberries, and second in peaches. It is only a three-hour drive into Chicago, a ready market for its products. In addition, the county has one of the largest wholesale fruit markets in the world, located in Benton Harbor.

The average size of farms in the county was 52.1 acres according to the 1935 census. While the land is held generally in small acreages, the capitalization is high, average value per farm being \$5,200. A farm with 20 acres in orchards in Berrien County is equivalent to a grain farm of several hundred acres elsewhere. Of 6,000 farms in the county, 4,000 are fruit farms, each of which hires some migratory labor.

Number and Concentration of Migrants

In early May of each year thousands of men, women, and children pour into Berrien County, Michigan, to pick fruit. By early June the migration into the county is in full swing, and the season lasts up to the end of October. The migrants are practically all from the Southern States, and form two distinct groups—white families from Missouri and Arkansas, and Negro groups of single workers. It has been carefully estimated that this year a minimum of 10,000 migrants were in the area, of which number about 7,500 were white families and about 2,500 Negroes. The Negro groups were concentrated chiefly around Sodus and Eau Claire, while the largest concentration

of whites was at Riverside, in Hagar Township. Analysis of this migrant population reveals further that 61 percent of the people come from Arkansas and Missouri; especially from Southeast Missouri and that part of Northeastern Arkansas lying along the Mississippi. The area, as may be seen from a map of the two states, is really one area, despite the state line. This is a region in which the pressure of population on the land is high, and where mechanization of farming operations is displacing many tenant and sharecropper families.

Conditions

There has been little provision for shelter for these migrant workers in Berrien County. "Jungle" camps have sprung up along the highways, on the edges of towns, and in the fields--jalopies abound everywhere. Tents of all descriptions, and many makeshift shelters which beggar description, were in use during the 1940 picking season. Occasionally a barn served as a bunkhouse; one such barn was housing 43 people. Cooking was invariably done outdoors on a few pieces of scrap metal collected here and there. Toilet facilities, where they existed, were so filthy they were little used by the migrants.

While there has been some concern expressed by local authorities over this situation, nothing has been done to alleviate it. There are indications that in a good many instances farmers are able to furnish better quarters, but the migration is a comparatively new one--only about six or seven years old--and the idea of furnishing quarters takes some time to grow before the need is established and recognized.

Earnings and Income

At the time this survey was made, dewberries and cherries and raspberries were just ripening; before the survey was finished their picking was well under

way. Dewberries and cherries brought two cents per quart to the pickers, while raspberries, more difficult to handle, brought two cents per pint. There had been about two weeks of unemployment since strawberry picking. Preliminary tabulations reveal that the average annual family income, including perquisites and relief, falls between \$500 and \$550, or between \$400 and \$500 exclusive of relief and perquisites. The total agricultural income of these families during the past 12 months from work in Michigan averaged roughly between \$90 and \$110. These figures are only crude averages based on a portion of the sample, but probably indicate the general trend. The amount earned in Michigan is significantly low when the length of stay is considered.

Why These People Migrate

The survey revealed that the great majority of these people are of farm background, mostly sharecroppers who have been forced off the land very recently, and farm laborers who for some years now have not been able to harvest a crop because of forces outside their control.

The introduction of machinery on the cotton plantations has made it profitable to use day labor instead of sharecroppers, and many former sharecroppers, rather than attempt to live on a wage rate of 75 cents per day have become migrants.

Declining foreign markets and the fluctuating prices for cotton have added immeasurably to the instability of an area already economically sick, and have uprooted whole communities. There is now work in cotton for these people only for a short period during chopping and picking time; for the rest of the year they must wander from state to state and do whatever they can to scratch out a living. It is primarily the cotton situation which is forcing thousands of

workers and their families to stream up the Mississippi Valley, following the strawberries until they hit the rich fruit belt in Michigan. At the present time, there is no evidence that this condition is abating. An intensification of the problem may be expected.

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